

Threase Finnegan, *Unspoken cultural knowledge: Understanding the endurance of the Aughakillymaude Mummers from County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland through performance ethnography*, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

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“The Aughakillymaude mummers are funded to travel at home and abroad presenting [their]... customs as genuine Irish, but they are not. Theatre yes, tradition no! On Bonfire Night (June 23rd) their group dances around a bonfire with straw hats and skirts. It looks good and the tourists love it- but it has nothing to do with custom or tradition. It’s an Aughakillymaude ‘Mummers’ invention... Proverb: Never make a tradition or break a tradition”¹.

In 2003, Joe McGowan of the Sidhe Gaoithe Mummers from County Sligo published this statement as part of his article ‘A Visit from Sligo’s Christmas Mummers’. When I began my fieldwork with the Aughakillymaude mummers², from Derrylin, County Fermanagh, this was one of the first articles I read about the group. I still remember feeling slightly confused as to why the Aughakillymaude mummers would change a ‘tradition’. Having a background in Irish traditional music, as organised and governed by Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann, it seemed normal that social practises, should never be altered. However, after conducting fieldwork with the Aughakillymaude mummers, I have realised that these “Aughakillymaude ‘mummers’ inventions” serve an important purpose. I propose that these “inventions” are actually helping mumming stay alive and active in County Fermanagh. The innovations which Joe McGowan makes reference to in his article include “carrying aloft naked, flaming torches in silent procession” and mixing Irish and European customs to make different characters for the Aughakillymaude mumming play. From an academic point of view, what I think is occurring is a process called centering and decentering, detailed by theorists such as Ulf Hannerz, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, which I will explain shortly. When you become immersed in the worlds of the people who practise mumming, whom it means so much to and is an integral part of their life, it is obvious that these innovations are not negative, as McGowan sees them. Rather they ensure that the social practise of mumming endures in County Fermanagh.

Ulf Hannerz, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs are advocates of the concept that all social practises have a central fixed point, and when they are moved from this point, we can call this decentralisation³. For example, Irish traditional music was given a central fixed point by

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Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann. Competitions, such as Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – The Irish music competition, function to maintain this centre. These competitions reward musicians who stick to the traditional style, and promote the same type of Irish traditional music endorsed by Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann. Any attempt to innovate the music from this ‘traditional’ style is, more often than not, unrewarded and may be seen as decentering. Decentering a social practise involves moving away from the predefined rules, and, put quite simply, ‘doing your own thing’. With regards to mumming, there is no formal governing body, no ‘Cleamairí na hÉireann’ or ‘Mummers of Ireland’. So when mummers, such as Joe McGowan, see mumming being changed and innovated, there is understandable fear that ‘traditional’ mumming may be lost.

In his article, McGowan creates a centre for Irish mumming, saying that “the true mummers go with their madcap revelry at Christmas and celebrate the winter solstice in the way of always. Strawboys in straw dress go out to weddings all through the year. Wrenboys go out on St. Stephen's night. It's important to know the difference.”⁴ The Aughakillymaude mummers, however, do not usually go out at Christmas. They mostly go out in the New Year or in the summer, when they are invited to outdoor performances. They wear straw costumes all year round, whether they are performing as strawboys at weddings, or as mummers. This may be seen as decentering the social practise of mumming, away from the conventional traditional centre, towards an innovative centre. McGowan touches on why the Aughakillymaude mummers actually do this, as he states “It looks good and the tourists love it”⁵. The Aughakillymaude mummers put on a ‘show’, whether conventional or not, to appeal to an audience and make them think, “This is something I can only see in Aughakillymaude”. We will now explain exactly what the Aughakillymaude mummers do in order to stage this ‘show’.

Imagine a dark night in County Fermanagh. The moonlight hits off Lower Lough Erne and reflects across the surface in a strange, wavy pattern. From the darkness, march unknown things, covered head to toe in straw. Gravel crunches under their feet as they march in unison, well almost in unison. The ones with slightly shorter legs take slightly shorter steps. Above these figures, flames flicker, pushed from side to side, backwards and forwards by the wind which blows from the lake. The mummers get closer and you see fence posts and metal rods, attached to the bottom of some tin cans, filled with firelighters which are now engulfed by orange and yellow flames. This was the first time I saw the mummers carry torches, and it

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was quite a breath taking sight. Absolutely mesmerised by these torches, I had the opportunity to be part of this spectacle during a mummer's performance at Belle Isle Castle.

Nothing can describe how cold it was that evening at Belle Isle. There was no snow or frost but a terribly cold wind blew across the vast, open green we were standing next to. Dressed head to toe in straw, I thought it would serve as insulation, but I was wrong. Trying to be an enthusiastic ethnographer, I volunteered to carry one of the torches for the torchlight procession, which precedes the mummer's entrance to the performance arena. Gary, one of the younger mummers, attempted to light my torch, which was packed with firelighters, but the wind soon blew this out. He tried again, as I, completely dressed in straw and nothing short of a fire hazard, tried to shield the wind from the torch. This did not help. We decided to move inside, out of the wind, and light the torch in the barn. Eventually, we got the torches lit and holding it with a pair of safety gloves (obviously a modern addition to the mummers costume), we were ready for the torchlight procession. Led by Dessie, the bag piper, the mummers held the torches high and marched about ten or twenty meters to the performance area, where we could see an audience of about twenty people. The evening had turned into night and the torches shone bright, but they were not the only light source. There was a fluorescent light beaming onto the crowd from inside one of the many sheds around the performance area. We marched around the grassy performance space three times, torches still flaming. The crowd pointed at the torches and clapped along with Dessie's music. We left the still flaming torches on a patch of grass behind us, and the performance began. The following photograph will help to understand the purpose of these torches.

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Figure 1: The Aughakillymaude Mummers burning John Barleycorn. Photography Courtesy of the Mummers Foundation.

This photograph was captured when the mummers, again bearing torches, burned the character of John Barleycorn, something the Aughakillymaude mummers believe comes from British custom. Instead of looking at the mummers and their torches, look at some of the audience members. In particular, look at the little girl labelled 'A'. Her eyes are absolutely fixed on the mummers and their torches. Such a strange, out of the ordinary sight would definitely create a lasting memory on such a young person. Also, look at the baby in the man's arms marked 'B', who is staring at the mummers. A frightening sight for such a small person, no doubt. What is clear is that the use of these torches is not for the mummers. There is nothing quite as frightening as being dressed completely in dry straw, wielding a large flaming torch, which is quite heavy and not easy to hold in the air for a long period of time. Maybe it is the risk of a mummer catching on fire that entertains the audience, but it is certain that this is for the audience's benefit. As William O. Beeman, the performance theorist has stated "Theatrical forms have no purpose without an audience"⁶. If there is no audience, there will be no mummers. What the Aughakillymaude mummers have done is put the audience at the centre of the performance, rather than the performance itself. Admittedly, it is not a 'traditional' performance, where old customs are adhered to. However, it is not the

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traditionality of the performance that matters. Impressing the audience, keeping them satisfied and making them want to attend the performance again is vital for the survival of mumming.

Again, we will draw from Joe McGowan's article. He has stated that the "Aughakillymaude Mummers' group are a mixum gatherum of Irish and European customs drawn from the different seasons and various countries.⁷" This is true and cannot be denied. The Aughakillymaude mummers do combine Irish and European customs to make a calendar of events where they can get together and perform their play. We saw this earlier when I mentioned that they burn a John Barleycorn figure, which they believe comes from British custom. Another aspect of Aughakillymaude's performance which has external influences is the white horse of Ben Aughlin character. The Bulgarian mumming play, which also features a horse character, was one of the main influences for creating the white horse of Ben Aughlin. Some other Irish customs, such as the inclusion of a horse character with the wren boys in Kerry and stories of white horses in myths from around county Fermanagh, also influenced its creation. The Bulgarian horse character itself, however, is not very pleasant to look at. It has a slim, brown head, made from wood. There are teeth arranged into the horse's jaw at odd angles, which make it look as if the horse is grimacing. The Aughakillymaude white horse costume is slightly more animated than the Bulgarian horse.

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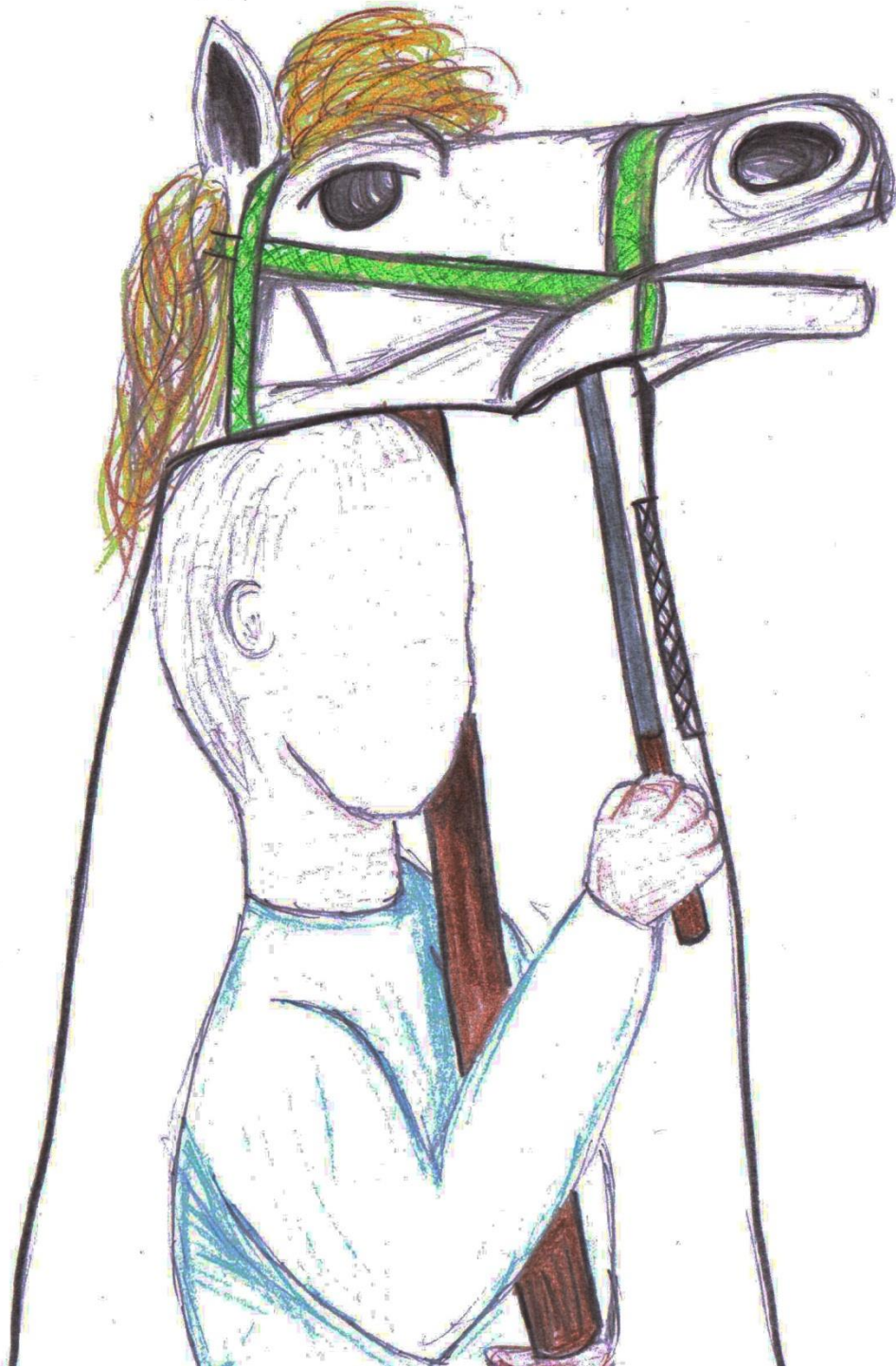


Figure 2: Sketch of the Mechanics of the White Horse of Ben Aughlin

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Made from bandages and paper mache over a wire frame, the sheer weight of the white horse of Ben Aughlin costume is quite unreal. It looks quite light, but lifting it, and holding it on the head, is a very difficult balancing act. The wooden pole, made from the handle of an old axe, is rested on the left shoulder and supported underneath by the left hand. The jaw can be moved up and down by pulling the metal pole attached to the base of the horse's mouth. What is obvious from this description is that the wearing of this horse is not for the mummers themselves. It would be much easier for them to put on a straw hat, which is comparably light, rather than this heavy piece of equipment. The wearing of this costume is for the audience's benefit, and this was quite obvious at a mummers parade in Lisbon, Portugal in 2011.

We marched the length of Lisbon main street, playing a couple of polkas. The mummers, led by a mummer on the bag pipes, headed for the performance stage, in the centre of the town. As we marched I saw Ciaran, dressed as the white horse, bolt up the street ahead of us and start to snap the horse's movable jaw at several of the audience members, who laughed and covered their faces. Some attempted to rub his paper maché snout, as he chased them up the street. He ran up to a police officer, who was overseeing the parade, and using the horse's movable jaw, snapped the hat from the police officer's head. The police officer laughed, tapped on the horse's snout and took his hat. He said something to Ciaran, who seemed to laugh, and bolted off down the street again. After the performance on the square I asked Ciaran what the police officer had said to him. "He said they usually arrest people when they take police officer's hats, but he let me go cos he knew it was only a joke".

There is a definite sense of carnival in this description. A sense that things can be turned on their head, convention defied, when you are wearing a mask. But this particular mask, the white horse of Ben Aughlin, serves a specific purpose. It is Aughakillymaude's face for interacting with the audience. Under the cover of this mask, Ciaran could steal the policeman's hat, and get away with it. The audience laughed at the horse's antics and wanted to become involved, so they petted and interacted with the horse. Watching the boys and girls in the audience cautiously put out their hands, touching the snout of the horse, and seeing their faces fill with joy as they petted him, only to be petrified with fear as the horse, all of a sudden, snaps his jaw in the child's face and runs off. Looks of shock, disbelief, a smile and then laughter wave across the child's face. These interactions with such a strange character will not be forgotten quickly by these young children. It is this sense of making mumming

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‘unforgettable’ that the Aughakillymaude mummers are trying to achieve by changing mumming. It is these changes, along with a strong sense of community, that have actually fed into the Aughakillymaude mummers continued existence.

Between 1910 and 1940, it was common for every town land in Fermanagh to have a troupe of mummers. During the 1940s, practising mumming began to fade as, as people’s homes were modernised and the conflict in Northern Ireland made it difficult to move about the country side late at night. Up until the end of the 1970s, the practise of mumming lay quite dormant. There was then a surge of mumming groups, who used mumming as a tool to collect money for charity and to build community centres, as the Aughakillymaude mummers did. Figure 1 gives an indication of the number of mumming groups from 1980s to 2003 in County Fermanagh.

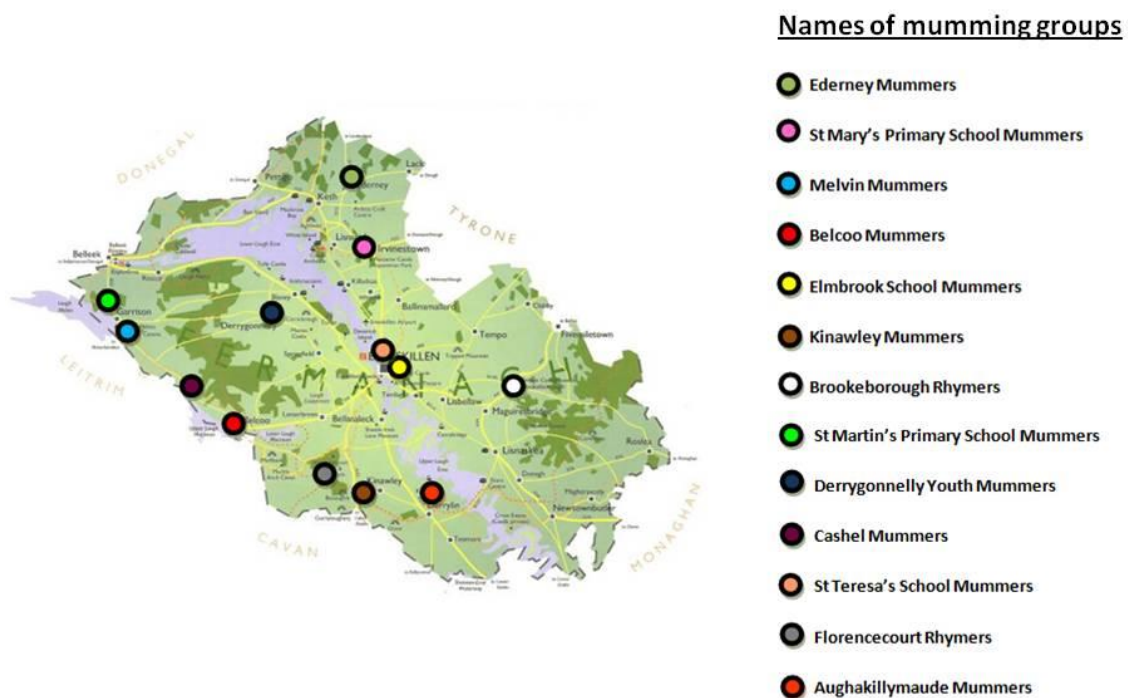


Figure 3: Map indicating some of the mumming groups active in County Fermanagh between the late 1980s and early 2000s”

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As we can see on the map, there were two groups active on the border between Cavan and Fermanagh, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It would have been quite difficult to practise mumming in this area with police checkpoints active up until the late 1990s. As we can see, mumming was very well represented throughout the County during this period. However, today there is only one active group remaining: the Aughakillymaude mummers. They have seen all the rest of the mumming groups in the County retire. Groups such as the Belcoo mummers and the Florencecourt mummers were very popular in the past. While the members of these groups are still alive, they do not perform any more. I have been told by members of these mumming groups that the audiences they performed for “weren’t interested and treated [them] like dirt”⁸. Uninterested audiences may be part of the reason for some groups dying out. However, seeing as the Aughakillymaude mummers have innovated the play to appeal to their audience, this may be the key to understanding why they have survived when the other mumming groups have faded.

I cannot deny that Joe McGowan is correct in his article. The Aughakillymaude mummers have gathered together Irish and European customs and integrated them into the mumming performance. New additions to the mumming performance which he mentions, such as fire torches, are indeed Aughakillymaude inventions. However, I think it is important for us to look at the bigger picture here. Granted, the Aughakillymaude mummers have invented some aspects to add to the play, but all these inventions serve a purpose. They have added an element of spectacle, as well as interaction with the audience, to create a memorable performance. By decentering the performance, from the ‘traditional’ centre, which involved performing the play traditionally, to a more audience focused centre, the Aughakillymaude mummers have become unique and memorable. If the audience are not impressed, they will not come back to see the performance again. So while some may see innovation in mumming performances as a negative thing, it has ultimately ensured the existence of the Aughakillymaude mummers in County Fermanagh.

Notes

1 McGowan, Joe

2003 A Visit from Sligo’s Christmas Mummers. Accessed at <http://www.sligoheritage.com/archmummers.htm>

2 ‘Aughakillymaude’ is locally pronounced as ‘ACK-LA-MAD’

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3 Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs, *Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1990, vol. 19 pp 59-88.

4 McGowan, Joe 2003

5 Ibid

6 Beeman, William O. *The Anthropology of Theater and Spectacle*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1993, vol. 22 pp 369-393.

7 McGowan, Joe 2003

8 This quote is taken from an interview conducted with the Florencecourt mumming community, as part of my Ph.D. research. Interview date: 10/12/2012